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Watch your teaching: A reflection strategy for EFL pre-service teachers through video recordings

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Abstract

The central issue addressed in this study is the use of video recordings to help foster the reflective practice of pre-service teachers. For the study, we used a qualitative research methodology to investigate and discuss the use of video recordings in the classroom as a means of promoting reflection among pre-service teachers of EFL. This study also reports on the participants' experiences, reactions and perceptions towards the use of video recordings of their teaching in the practicum. In this study, the data were provided whereby the video-recordings of both the actual teaching and the post-conferences held over three weeks. The three participants also kept reflective journals and answered an open-ended questionnaire. The results revealed that the video inclusion helped them to raise awareness particularly about the problems of their L2 use, the unfamiliarity between themselves and the students, and the effect of their moods on the day of teaching. Furthermore, the participants expressed a strong belief in the value and effectiveness of watching their teaching episodes weekly as to reach several questions, realizations and changes about their teaching practices in the practicum.

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1. Introduction

Reflection and its presence in contemporary teacher education programs is hardly questioned today. Undoubtedly, “reflection” is practiced so regularly in teacher education that teacher educators rarely question its merits although the

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students may sometimes do (Fendler, 2003). As a regular occurrence in most teacher training institutions, pre-service teachers are supposed to reflect on their teaching practices chiefly by writing. Although the ways of reflection may be debated, the value of one's learning by reflecting on his/her teaching is almost never refuted. According to Zeichner (1992), reflection has matured into a motto around which teacher educators are united for the sake of a teacher education enhancement. Previous studies asserted that reflective practices improved teaching (Shon, 1987; Jay and Johnson, 2000).

According to Eröz-Tuğa (2013), reflection should be a common practice for teacher trainers and trainees who possess some certain notions and principles about the methodology of teaching a foreign language. Despite its recognized value and a general agreement on its effectiveness, however, it seems that reflection may not necessarily be a part of teacher training programs due to several reasons such as “the organization of the practicum, willingness of university supervisors to spend extra time with trainees, and motivation of the trainees” (Eröz-Tuğa, 2013, p.176). Furthermore, when the pre-service teachers start practicing an authentic teaching in their placement schools during the practicum, they encounter a vastly astounding intricacy of expectations and classroom situations (Harford, MacRuaric and McCartan, 2010). Consequently, they may simply overlook the links between theory and practice of teaching and be merely confined to the mechanical and superficial aspects of their teaching (Barone, Berliner, Casanova and McGowan, 1996). To promote and better utilize reflection to bridge this gap between theory and practice in teacher education, much research has been centered on the employment of video technology (Wright, 2010; Calandra, Gurvitch, & Lund, 2008; Sherin and van Es, 2005; Sherin and Han, 2004). Although there is an abundant number of research widely reporting the effectiveness of digital video use in fostering critical reflection in teacher education (Rich and Hannafin 2009; Harford and MacRuaric 2008; Rosaen, Lundeberg, Cooper, Fritzen and Terpstra, 2008; Newhouse, Lane, and Brown 2007), there is still much need to investigate the ways of exploiting digital video in teacher training programs for reflective purposes.

With this regard, the major premise of this study is to help pre-service teachers become conscious, rational and analytical about their own strengths and weaknesses in teaching aided by the inclusion of video self-analysis into their practicum. The study aims to understand the use of video recordings in the classroom as a means of promoting reflection among 3 pre-service teachers of EFL studying at Anadolu University in pursuit of answering these research questions;

1. How do trainees evaluate themselves as a teacher and the classroom events through watching their video-recorded teaching?
2. What are the trainees' perceptions towards watching their recorded teaching sessions in the practicum?

2. Literature review

Eröz-Tuğa (2013) suggested that practicum is a vital prerequisite for pre-service teachers to be prepared for real ESL or EFL teaching contexts and it serves as an intermediary basin between training to teach and actual teaching. She goes on suggesting, however, that reflection can be highly neglected due to the course construction of the practicum and a lack of institutional or individual enthusiasm to allocate extra time and effort for practicing reflection (Eröz-Tuğa, 2013). One resulting consequence of this convention is the frustration of the teacher candidates. Some studies concluded that pre-service teachers feel anxious and unclear concerning the feedback and the evaluation procedures of the practicum (Gömlüksiz, Mercin, Bulut and Atan, 2006; Celik, 2008; Paker, 2011). Consequently, it is plausible to claim that feedback which is based on authentic teaching samples can have an actual effect on teacher growth (Arter, 1999). Moreover, conventional observation and note taking strategies may not always reflect the genuine capacities of the candidates since the attendance of an observer can result in some unusual behaviors (Walsh, Glaser and Wilcox, 2006). Using video-captured sessions of actual teaching in a reflective manner might be useful to overcome this distress. Sherin (2003) ,for example, advices that university supervisors watch at least segments of a videotape to delineate a point about teaching and that this application would be more fruitful than merely providing written or oral feedback drawn on from an observation. Miyata (2002) also notes that the supervisions and assessments of university supervisors and mentor teachers may be the sole source of data during the practicum and that this kind of partial assessment- without enough number of observations and conference sessions- focusing only on the instruction may prevent professional teaching advancement. Thus, the pre-service teachers should be supported with the data from a range of sources to accompany their supervisors' feedback, therefore, making sense of it (Freiberg and

Waxman, 1988). In the next session, we briefly presented the related literature on how video use in the practicum could facilitate reflection among pre-service teachers.

Video use in reflection allows reflection to be an enduring and intelligible practice (Wright, 2010). Rich and Hannafin (2009) mentioned that teachers can consider, scrutinize and evaluate authentic samples of their teaching by means of video-captured episodes of their personal teaching. This aid to reflection enables the subtle classroom situations to be explicitly appraised and thus filling the theory-practice divide of pre-service teachers (Perry and Talley, 2001) as well as helping pre-service teachers to instructionally decide in real and specific teaching contexts (Stevens, 2007). Assisted by videos as a medium for promoting reflection, pre-service teachers can generate “evidence-based” ideas about their own teaching qualifications (Calandra, Brantley-Dias, Lee, & Fox, 2009; Rich & Hannafin, 2009). In his study, Snoeyink (2010) reported that pre-service teachers held a powerful belief in the efficiency of self-analysis by means of video to recognize classroom events and develop their persona as a teacher.

As an example to research studies documenting that video use prompted reflection among pre-service teachers, we can address Kong’s recent study (2010). The researcher compared a cohort of pre-service teachers’ reflective notes both before and after browsing their recorded teaching sessions and found that the participants produced 50% more of reflective notes after self-analyzing on video. In another research, Calandra et.al. (2009) studied with two groups of pre-service teachers. One group interrogated with their supervisor about the critical events that appeared during their teaching and, then, they wrote reflective journals guided by a rubric. The other group also wrote reflective journals, however, they were first asked to record their teaching and to revisit their videos. Though guided by the same rubric, those who video-recorded their teaching wrote longer and more versatile reflective expressions.

Counter to a body of research findings that video use facilitates reflection and teacher development, there are several drawbacks ahead of its use for reflective purposes in educational settings. Some of these drawbacks result from a lack of outlined procedures and systems for video applications. Miyata (2002), for example, claims that carefully drawn frameworks of action and methodical instructions and rules for video use are needed in order for video to be an effective reflection tool. Le Fevre (2004), similarly, exerted that video can be effectively included into a curriculum only when its outline of usage is deliberately structured for targeted learning outcomes. Other drawbacks are related to the logistics: high expense and practicality; position of the record device (locating the camera so that it can capture the notable events from several angles); and issues of resonance and digital file format (Storeygard and Fox, 1995; Brophy, 2004). Depending on the relevant literature reviewed, this study hypothesizes that the inclusion of video into the practicum is a contributory supplement for reflective practices.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research context

This study was carried out at Anadolu University’s ELT department in Eskişehir, Turkey. In this four-year degree program, the students take courses of ELT methods, linguistics, language skills and literature. Senior students take a School Experience class in the first semester of the year which requires them to mainly observe real classroom teaching environment and practices in provincial public schools. In the School Experience course, the pre-service teacher students also share the parts of a lesson as a cohort and practice teaching. In the following semester, similarly, the students take a Practice Teaching course which, in fact, constitutes the primary portion of their teaching experience. Unlike School Experience, each student takes the responsibility of a whole class hour weekly in their placement schools during the course of Practice Teaching. The pre-service teachers collaborate with the school teachers and they are inspected and assessed through observations by their university supervisors. The university supervisors give feedback upon their observations, often twice during the semester. It may, however, be generally difficult for the pre-service teachers to find the time and opportunity to exercise the feedback received into the Practice Teaching experience. This situation forms the main concern and the outlet of this research study.

3.2. Participants

The number of the participants in this study is 3. They were all pre-service teachers of EFL taking the Practice Teaching course in the spring term of 2012-2013 academic year and aged between 22 and 24. Pseudonyms were used. I, as the researcher, asked a Practice Teaching supervisor in the department to study with a group of students under her supervision. Upon her consent, I met a group of students of three who would together teach at the same school and expressed the voluntary nature of participation into the research study. After the expectations and the procedures were clearly outlined in our first meeting, the pre-service teachers were assured that their contribution would not be a bias over their course grades.

3.3. Instruments and the data collection procedure

Several materials were exploited to collect the data for this study. The data collection procedure lasted for three weeks. Firstly, as the researcher, I visited the public school where the participants taught to video-record the each teaching session of 45-minute on the same day. The camera situated at the very back of the classroom could clearly capture the voice and image of both the pre-service teachers and the students with nearly the whole classroom surrounding. I also stayed in the classroom taking some field notes. On the next day of the observation, the pre-service teachers attended a post-conference as they were appointed to view their recorded teaching for self-analysis. They had been previously provided with a guiding sheet to outline various teaching aspects to ease the self-analysis procedure. All the post-conferences were also video-taped.

Secondly, the pre-service teachers were required to keep a reflective journal for three weeks after each teaching experience. They had also been supplied with brief notes and Power-point slides mentioning how to write and what to include in a reflective journal on the first meeting held before the conferences started. Thirdly, at the end of the last post-conference the participants answered an open-ended questionnaire adapted from Gün (2011). The open-ended questionnaire aimed to uncover the feelings and perceptions of the participants about the reflective procedure they attended. Specifically, we asked about a) their feelings on whether this procedure helped them to improve their reflectivity, b) how this procedure could be improved by specifying the difficulties they had during the application (if any), and c) how they would compare their previous and regular observations to these ones by specifying the advantages and disadvantages (if any). (See Appendix).

3.4. Data analysis

Analyzing the data sets of this study includes both qualitative strategies for the reflective journals and open-ended questionnaire and a basic quantitative analysis method for the rating scale. The mean scores of the 17 items of the rating scale were separately calculated and tabulated. Thematic content analysis was employed for the textual analysis of the reflective journals and open-ended questionnaire (Weber, 1990). First of all, the journals and the responses to the open-ended questions were thoroughly read more than once for the persistent, inconsistent or interesting patterns to emerge. While reading, the researcher took many margin notes, which would be the labels of probable codes. These units of codes were related to a persistent group or amount of words found in the participants' writing. By doing so, some theoretical categories were established by combining the relevant codes. During this recurring textual analysis, the codes and the emerging categories were constantly clarified and revised. This process helped us to group and present the large amount of textual data in a consequential and purposeful way.

To further certify the results, the video-recorded reflective post conferences were analyzed by benefiting from the category list developed from the thematic analysis of reflective journals and open-ended questionnaire. Considering the emergent category list and watching the videos of the post-conferences more than once, the researcher noted specific and relevant expressions and ideas to sophisticate and support the findings.

4. Results

4.1. Perceived difficulties in L2 use

As for the RQ1, the reflective journals and the video-recorded post-conferences were thoroughly analyzed. First, it was seen that the three participants faced some problems related to correct L2 use. One of the problems was about the mispronunciation of some common words as we can see in the quotations from the students' video-recorded post conferences;

"I could not even once correctly pronounce the adjective 'sleepy'. Unbelievable, because it is a very common word." (Emre, 1st Conference)

"I was so excited today and I mispronounced the word 'great' many times as something like 'greet'" (Özge, 1st Conference)

Another problem in the participants' L2 was about the correct use of prepositions that have to be jointly used with certain verbs. This was a striking mistake which also surprised the participants as well, when they realized it;

"I said 'listen me' and 'look me' today. In fact, I noted before the class to use these correctly but I forgot again" (Özge, 2nd Conference)

"I am very happy that I said 'listen to me' this time" (Özge, 3rd Conference)

While watching her first recorded lesson, Ceyda also realized some errors in her L2, specifically about the use of prepositions, such as "wait me, listen me or mention about" and she attributed these incorrect usages to her "excitement and hurry" in her first journal. She goes on saying that "Why do I move and speak too fast and loudly? I can't believe. I didn't know that I act in such a hurry and my English gets worse when I shout" (Ceyda, 1st Conference). Additionally, Emre was once challenged by the prepositions and the non-standard English use.

"I tried to use L2 correctly but I wrote 'go to' and 'went to' as the past form of the verb as it had been a single word or phrasal verb" (Emre, 3rd Conference)

"Nop and Yeap instead of yes and no..., students asked me what 'yeap' was. I will not use them again" (Emre, 1st Conference)

4.2. Influence of the teacher mood

Content analysis of the reflective journals and the video-recorded post conferences also revealed that these pre-service teachers sometimes mix their personal matters into their teaching practices. When they are sad, tired or unmotivated, they had difficulty in controlling their feelings and reflected a negative attitude on the students. The pre-service teacher who noticed and complained of this problem the most was Emre;

"At the very beginning, I was even bored of my own teaching. I didn't want to go on. Afterwards, thanks to the students' efforts I cheered up a bit. I think we should leave behind our personal problems while teaching" (Emre, 1st Journal).

"I got so angry for the first time in the practicum. What I want to see is whether I could control my anger or not" (Emre, 2nd journal)

"I shouted at the two most silent girls. I shouldn't have shouted at them. They didn't attend the activities but at least they are not making any noise. I will please them next week" (Emre, 2nd Conference)

Ceyda was always complaining about her hasty and unnecessarily fast teaching. This time she attributed her inability of not recognizing classroom events or not paying individual attention to the students to a deformity in her mood. She remarked;

"Due to my tiredness and sickness this week, I could not manage to interact with the students again, didn't care if they understood or not. I just finished my lesson and left the class" (Ceyda, 3rd journal)

4.3. The relationship with the mentor teacher and the unfamiliarity between pre-service teachers and their students

All the three pre-service teachers distinguished that they know neither the students nor their levels or interests well enough both to choose the right subjects and to adjust the right difficulty level of their activities. As a pre-service teacher in the practicum, they do not teach the same class every week. They change the grades weekly. This might be

helpful for them to see various student profiles from different ages and levels. On the other hand, this practice creates an unfamiliarity and distance between them and the students. In the quotations below they mentioned;

“I wish I could know the students more but we don’t teach the same class every week” (Emre, 1st Conference)

“Yes I should get to know the students more but how? That was my first time in that class” (Ceyda, 2nd Conference)

“We don’t know the students. We can’t communicate with them well” (Özge, 3rd journal)

Another identified issue both in the journals and conferences is concerned with the mentor teacher of the pre-service teachers. Ceyda, for example, stated that she was desperate when her planned subject had been already taught and the teaching activities were found too easy by the students;

“I taught how to tell the time this week. The mentor teacher told me not to teach structures like ‘ten past two or twenty to three’. I planned to teach only the full and the half hours. But the students had already learnt the full and half hours and there was nothing new to teach. I just kept the song deliberately long just to fill in time” (Ceyda, 2nd Journal)

As we already specified, Ceyda could not manage to interact with the classroom and the environment in an authentic way and she remained indifferent to the students’ reactions or replies. In the first conference, she remarked that the mentor teacher mislead her about the student behaviors and caused prejudice against the students;

“In fact, the mentor teacher had warned me about how noisy and naughty this class was. That’s why I tried to control them by shouting at the beginning and by behaving too fast and hasty” (Ceyda 1st Conference)

Emre, on the contrary, indicated that he should have examined the students’ course books more often and seriously besides consulting with the mentor teacher to bridge the distance between himself and the students;

“My biggest problem is not to know where the students were left in their course books. I can’t adjust the right level in my activities. They are either too difficult or too easy. I will try to be more in touch with the mentor teacher about the students, and about what they know or don’t know” (Emre, 1st Journal)

4.4. Questions, realizations and changes in teaching strategies

All the participants questioned and realized some certain points in their teaching and went through some changes. For example, Özge did not feel content about the way she first started the lesson. Conventionally, they always wrote in their lesson plans some greetings such as “good morning” or questions such as ‘what did you do at the weekend?’ to begin the lesson. The purpose here, of course, was not merely greet the students, rather this beginning part was supposed to be a meaningful and transitional part. She, however, realized in the second conference that the way she began did not work at all;

“I asked ‘what did you do at the weekend?’ This is not an interesting question. Nobody replied” (Özge, 2nd Conference)

In her last week, she wrote in her journal that beginning the lesson with a usual classroom procedure worked better than asking what the students did at the weekend and immediately started the lesson;

“This time I started the lesson by checking the attendance because last week the students were not motivated at all when I immediately introduced the subject” (Özge, 3rd Journal)

Emre also pointed the same issue;

“Do I have to say ‘Good morning, how was your weekend?’ to begin the lesson? It does not work to manage silence. It is four minutes [in the video] and I am not even heard by the students.” (Emre, 2nd Conference)

Emre did a True –False activity in his first week and he realized that he could not explain the false answers effectively in his first conference and suggested a probable solution and applied the solution in the second week;

“There is a chaos right now while explaining the false answers. If I had wrote the answers of True-False activity on the board, it would have been better” (Emre, 1st Conference)

“I definitely learnt not to forget checking the answers of my activities on the board” (Emre, 2nd Journal).

In his conferences, Emre was once asked why he never made the students note down. As an impact of this recognition process, he made the students note down what was written on the board;

“This week I found a chance to apply a lacking point in my teaching about which we talked last week. I got the students to take note for the first time. I specifically focused on this point and did not neglect it this time” (Emre, 3rd journal)

Ceyda, though not during the whole lesson but at least at some moments, gradually focused on the idea that she should slow and calm down and she stated;

“I think I paused and replied to my students in my class today. I made eye contacts. I think I was slower this time for a genuine interaction” (Ceyda, 2nd Journal)

In the open-ended questionnaire, we firstly asked how the reflective post conferences held weekly helped pre-service teachers improve their reflectivity. All the three participants jointly stated that seeing their peers weak and strong points in the video-recorded post conferences helped them either to avoid from making the same mistakes or trying to adapt the strong aspects.

“I noted the troublesome aspects of my peers’ teaching and I contributed to the discussion about their teaching in our meetings. That helped me not to make the same mistakes” (Ceyda)

“I found the chance to observe my friends, too. I tried to do what they do right and avoid from what they do wrong” (Özge)

“While observing my friends’ teaching, I thought about which aspects they would talk about or not in the meeting” (Emre)

The pre-service teachers also commented that watching the videos of their own teaching provided a unique opportunity to objectively see and assess themselves, making them see what was not seen or even felt during the actual teaching;

“While I supposed that I was controlling the classroom, some students were not interested in the lesson at all. That’s what I saw in my videos. If somebody tells you about this you may be offended but when you see yourself in that situation, you become objective and clearly understand what is going on.” (Emre)

“To me the most advantageous part of this procedure was to see ourselves with proofs. We saw in the videos what we didn’t realize in the classroom.” (Ceyda)

“It so straightforwardly showed my mistakes in English and I do not say ‘listen me’ anymore” (Özge)

We, secondly, required the pre-service teachers to compare this procedure assisted by the video to the previously taken regular feedback without a video inclusion. The identified points include the time of the post conferences. We held the reflective post conferences on the next day of teaching which enabled a lively assessment of the teaching day. By this way, it is stated that the pre-service teachers had enough time to prepare for the next lesson in the light of what they learnt or noticed in the videos;

“Another important issue is that we met immediately after the teaching day. I don’t think that this application would work after a long time from the teaching. We had the time to think about and include the feedback” (Özge)

Another addresses issue about the procedure was that it reflected the real classroom circumstances which could not sometimes be explained by the theory or methodical knowledge. Thus, it is claimed that the theoretical knowledge about teaching was promoted through this procedure;

“In our method courses, we learn the rules, how an activity should be constructed and in which order they should be given. But the things in the classroom are not like that simple. I saw that what matters the most is to make the best use of each activity, not to do all the activities in the lesson plan.” (Ceyda)

What all the three participants recommended in the open-ended questionnaire is that this procedure should be longer than three weeks and should start at the beginning of the year. They wrote that they had difficulty in sparing time for the meetings and for writing the journals since they were preparing for a very demanding public examination to be appointed as a teacher beside the ongoing university courses and examinations.

“I got so tired from time to time as I was studying for the public personnel selection exam. I wish this procedure could be extended over two semesters” (Özge)

“The most challenging part was about managing the time to attend the post-conferences as we were too busy just before the graduation” (Emre)

5. Discussion and conclusion

The major purpose of this study was to investigate whether the pre-service teachers can better notice and interpret the classroom circumstances by watching their own video-recorded teaching episodes. This study also aimed at how the participating pre-service teachers appreciate the value of watching their own videotapes along with some suggestions for the improvement of this video procedure. The three pre-service teachers in this study jointly agreed that they benefitted from watching their own videos of teaching to become more aware of the classroom atmosphere and critical of themselves as a teacher so as to understand the students’ learning. The results also suggest that the pre service teachers had an opportunity to notice and seriously discuss and comment on their weak or strong points in the

meetings conducted for this purpose. By assessing themselves in their recorded teaching videos, the pre-service teachers became conscious of the events that occurred during their teaching which they could not realize in the classroom and even which they would not believe “if someone else told” them. These results bear a resemblance to a number of recent research studies (Sherin and van.Es, 2005; Maclean and White, 2007; Wright, 2010; Koç, 2011; Gün, 2011; Eröz-Tuğa, 2013).

According to the results, this video-assisted reflective procedure specifically helped the pre-service teachers to recognize their mistakes in L2 use and how their personal problems on the day of teaching affect their performance. Furthermore, the pre-service teachers reached a realization about their teaching methodology. To specify, they pointed at how they should begin the lesson to attract more attention, that they should always check the answers of their activities and, that they should try to calm down and interact with the students in a more natural way without a hurry just to implement the whole lesson plan. Additionally, it is also revealed that how the pre-service teachers complain about the unfamiliarity between themselves and the students. This unfamiliarity results from the teaching timetable of the practicum course. The pre-service teachers in the practicum teach different classes and grades and even the practicing schools change over the two semesters. The participants of this study attributed many of their problems to this unfamiliarity resulted from this timetable. The problems are mostly concerned with not knowing the students’ levels of English or the true scope of their knowledge. This caused either a wrong choice of subject or activities. During the practicum, pre-service teachers work in collaboration with a mentor teacher at the practice school. The pre-service teachers are assisted and guided by the mentor teachers. In this study, the pre-service teachers specified that their mentor teacher’s warnings or guidance mislead them about the students and especially their levels. Because the mentor teacher was the only data source that pre-service teachers rely on, beside the course books, our participants think that they should be discussing the students and their background in detail with the mentor teacher to learn more about what the students know or do not know.

The open-ended questionnaire uncovered the participants’ perceptions about the video assisted reflective procedure as well as the perceived profits and their suggestions for enhancement. The pre-service teachers also compared the feedback provided by this procedure and the possibility to apply that feedback into practice to the previous and regular feedback sessions held only twice a semester. As a result of this comparison, self-analysis by watching themselves on the video and discussing the teaching with the peers and the supervisor (with the researcher in the case of the study) was considered to be more beneficial than getting merely an oral feedback depending on seldom observations. The participants stated that the courses in the degree program are strictly focused on the rules of teaching methodology, however, that the real teaching environment may be more complex and demanding beyond the methodology.

On the whole, this study has concentrated on acquiring in-depth knowledge about the perceptions of the participants on the practicum phenomenon. In the wake of interpreting the results of the study, it should be noted that the results are restricted to the experiences of three pre-service teachers and cannot be taken as an evidence for generalizations.

Appendix A.

The open-ended questionnaire

Open-ended Questionnaire Form

Name/Surname:

Thank you for your participation...

How do you think these reflective post conferences held weekly help you improve your reflectivity?

How do you think this reflective procedure can be improved? Please specify the difficulties (if any) you had during the procedure?

How do you compare the regular observations you had so far to these ones? Please specify the advantages or disadvantages?

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